

The Trump Administration's 1776 Report: The far-right attempts to seize opening from the 1619 Project

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The *New York Times*' 1619 Project, published in 2019, was an attempt to reinterpret American history through the prism of race and racial struggle. It condemned the American Revolution as a struggle by whites to preserve slavery against the British empire. It portrayed Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Emancipation Proclamation and led the North to victory in the Civil War, as a racist. Throughout American history, according to the 1619 Project, black people fought alone to redeem democracy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* played a leading role in rebutting the 1619 Project, publishing a comprehensive and detailed series of essays and interviews with leading historians. These essays and interviews, which touched off a major national controversy, exposed the 1619 Project as a politically motivated falsification of history—and a gift to Trump and the far-right.

“By repudiating and denigrating the American Revolution and Civil War, the *New York Times* has provided an opportunity for Trump,” the WSWWS warned. Indeed, it was not long before Trump himself appeared before the television cameras to respond to the 1619 Project with demands to “restore patriotic education.” In his typically menacing fashion, Trump declared that “our youth will be taught to love America.”

This is the context for the Trump administration's last-minute “1776 Report,” released on January 18, Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The 1776 Report was prepared by a hand-picked commission of 16 members that did not include a single professional historian. The committee's chair, Larry P. Arnn, is the president of the right-wing Hillsdale College. Arnn attracted controversy in 2013 when his college was accused of discriminatory admissions practices, which he described in inflammatory testimony to the Michigan legislature with the words: “we didn't have enough dark ones, I guess, is what they meant.”

Arnn's committee released the 1776 Report less than two weeks after Trump and sections of the Republican Party attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 elections by means of a violent coup, and two days before incoming President Joe Biden's inauguration on January 20. Predictably, the Biden administration promptly rescinded it.

The 1776 Report begins with what is weakest in the 1619 Project—namely the historical significance of the American Revolution and Civil War—and proceeds from there to the right-wing's favorite issues and hated targets: guns, family, prayer, God, and law and order, on one side, and multiculturalism, Hollywood, colleges, and public education, on the other.

The document makes reference to the basic principles of the American Revolution, including “equality” (which the authors hasten to “qualify”), but insist that “principle is only one” of the factors “binding the American people together” which is “insufficient by itself.”

The authors invoke a minor passage written by American revolutionary

John Jay (1745–1829) in the *Federalist Papers*, which described the American revolutionaries as “a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs ...” From this passage, the authors insist that “a republican people must share a large measure of commonality in manners, customs, language, and dedication to the common good.”

This essentially fascistic insistence on the necessity of cultural and linguistic homogeneity was issued, unsurprisingly, under the auspices of the same administration that was behind the infamous “Muslim ban” and the deliberate abuse of the children of refugees by separating them from their parents. In this shabby attempt to find in the American Revolution a historical and theoretical justification for such policies, one catches a whiff of the stink of fascistic aides like Stephen Miller, Jared Kushner, and Stephen Bannon.

From there, the document seeks at every turn to weave religion into the historical narrative of the United States. The words “God” and “Christianity” appear repeatedly. In contrast to Thomas Jefferson, who insisted on a “wall of separation” between church and state, the authors of the 1776 Report insist that “religious faith is indispensable to the success of republican government.”

Turning abruptly to American history after the Civil War, the Trump administration's report becomes what can only be described as deranged. Progressivism, associated with the era of reforms from 1896 to 1916, is equated by the authors with fascism, communism, and slavery as “challenges to America's principles.”

According to the 1776 Report, the Progressive Era reforms created a “shadow government” of bureaucratic regulators that “today operates largely without checks and balances.” The progressives, according to the report, were like fascist dictator Benito Mussolini because they sought to “centralize power under the management of so-called experts.”

The implication of this tortured historical narrative is a demand for the wholesale reversal of more than a century of national reforms: a return to unlimited work hours, unchecked tyranny in the workplace, and the failed laissez-faire system of unbridled domination by the capitalist class that prevailed until the stock market crash of 1929.

One of the most significant and representative cases of the progressive era was the Supreme Court case of *Lochner v. New York* in 1905, which involved an attempt by the state of New York to limit the work week of bakery employees to 60 hours—an attempt the authors of the 1776 Report presumably would have opposed.

In its explicit rejection of “progressivism,” the 1776 Report provides a glimpse of the ideas now wafting around far-right and libertarian circles in America. Speaking for the interests of most rapacious sections of the financial oligarchy, those denouncing “progressivism” regard any

attempts to mitigate or limit the power of the billionaires as impermissible “interference” by the government in the operations of the “free” market.

The document is full of contradictions. After having denounced the progressives’ theory of a “living” Constitution—according to which each new generation can discover in the essential principles of the founding documents new implications for democratic rights—the authors claim to posture as defenders of the legacy of the civil rights movement, despite the fact that the resulting reforms were implemented as part of a legal framework that the same authors had equated with Mussolini only a few pages before.

The authors of the 1776 Report contrast the demands for racial preferences now put forward by the practitioners of identity politics with the universal demands for equality that were advanced by Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. But in the 1776 Report, this contrast appears only as an empty talking point, as the authors have no coherent explanation for why the civil rights struggles were necessary at all.

Indeed, the Trump administration stood in the tradition of all those forces in American society that resisted the struggle to dismantle the system of racial apartheid in the southern states. As grotesque as it is to see the Trump administration attempting to drape itself in the mantle of the civil rights struggles, this state of affairs has only been made possible by the protracted shift to the right by all that remains of the “civil rights” establishment, exemplified by the 1619 Project itself.

From this bizarre account of American history in the twentieth century, the 1776 Report careens into hysterical anticommunism, equating socialism and communism with slavery and fascism. After a tirade featuring quotes from Ronald Reagan, the document concludes with a straight face that the theories behind fascism and communism “fail” because they “deny the existence of God.”

Then the document concludes with a rant titled “national renewal,” in which the authors emphasize the importance of family, prayer, religion, and gun ownership. The document proceeds to make a case for purging the schools, purging the universities, and purging Hollywood of unpatriotic sentiments, along the lines of Campus Watch.

All this has a distinctly fascist hue. Americans must be taught to speak of America with “reverence and love,” the report threatens, and must “stand up” to those who “deny her greatness.” Schools must be purged of “any curriculum” or theories that “demean America’s heritage, dishonor our heroes, or deny our principles.” Given how America’s “principles” were defined on the preceding pages, this amounts to a demand for purging everyone who disagrees with Trump and the Republicans.

The final passage of the document features a spirited harangue in favor of “reverence for the laws”—which comes across as almost comical in its context, having been issued in the aftermath of a violent attempt by Trump to overturn the results of the 2020 elections.

Indeed, at the same moment as the 1776 Report was being uploaded to a government website, Trump himself was issuing a barrage of last-minute pardons for convicted criminals who had served as political allies or pawns of his mafia-style family organization.

The historian James McPherson, who was interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* regarding the 1619 Project, commented drily in the Princeton student newspaper: “While I think the 1619 Project has problems, nevertheless, countering it the way the 1776 Report did—it exalted one idea or approach to American history, that it is a triumphant story—is not the answer to the shortcomings of the 1619 Project.”

In the final analysis, the 1776 Report can only be regarded as a hastily thrown-together attempt by the Trump administration to capitalize on the shipwreck of the 1619 Project and claim the legacy of the two American revolutions for its own brand of fascist “America First” nationalism.

But even as such, it is a weak effort. The full 1776 Report, without appendices, is only twenty pages, and about a quarter has been cut-and-

past from other sources, according to analysis published in *Politico* magazine.

It is a remarkable fact that with all the libraries and museums at its disposal, with limitless resources and grants, with legions of federal employees at its beck and call—and with all the original documents in archives and glass cases—that this twenty-page fascist hack job was all that the American government could muster in defense of the legacy of the American Revolution and Civil War.

This is not an accident, but expresses the complete historical and political bankruptcy of the more and more openly fascist American right wing, which has now gathered defiantly around Trump even after the failed coup of January 6. The 1776 Report has only to be contrasted with the devastating critique of the 1619 Project from the left developed by the *World Socialist Web Site* over the preceding year and a half.

The authors of the 1619 Project and the 1776 Report have more in common than they may care to admit. Both replace class struggle in history with forms of nationalist mythmaking—right-wing black nationalism in the former, and far-right “America First” nationalism in the latter. Both falsify America’s revolutionary history in service of the present-day political needs of factions of the ruling class—the 1619 Project for the Democratic Party and its satellites; the 1776 Report for Trump and the Republicans. Neither the 1619 Project nor the 1776 Report can tell much of the actual history of the United States—much less a coherent articulation of the democratic legacy of the American Revolution and Civil War.

Leon Trotsky’s words in *Results and Prospects* apply to both efforts: “The bourgeoisie has shamefully betrayed all the traditions of its historical youth, and its present hirelings dishonor the graves of its ancestors and scoff at the ashes of its ideals.”

It was first and foremost the *World Socialist Web Site*, the organ of the international Trotskyist movement, that was able to articulate and provide a rallying point for the defense of what was historically progressive in American history. This is because the struggle to defend the progressive achievements of the past is inseparably connected with the international struggle to advance the cause of socialism today.



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